Your Working Future

More and more companies are going virtual, whether it's to save money, attract talented employees, or benefit the environment, The extinction of the physical office is a Soft Trend – it is not a future fact – but the increasing importance of the virtual office is a Hard Trend, and it will continue to rapidly increase on a global level.

This presents some exciting opportunities for Anticipatory Organizations™ and it goes far beyond advanced cloud applications.. I want you to look past the obvious and think about the implications that aren't on anyone else's radar yet. That's where opportunity lies.

How do we measure virtual work?

Will the characteristics of a leader be redefined just as the office is getting redefined? We've all known incredibly talented individuals whose careers stalled because no one could get along with them. We've all known people who didn't necessarily have the technical skills to do a particular job but could inspire their employees to achieve miracles. In a totally virtual office, how will we measure success like that? Might it all come down to productivity – a virtual sweatshop where it all comes down to who can crank out the most work? The organization that figures out what's going to matter most and how to measure and reward it will have a huge opportunity.

Now, think about long-term projects. Some employees spend months or years working on a single project. They may not make a measurable amount of progress every day. Which business is going to cash in on helping enterprises measure productivity in those situations?

What happens to HR?

What are the implications for human resources? Some people are good at managing themselves and don't need to be in an office setting to be productive. Others need to be around people or else they are unhappy and unproductive when they are trying to work at home. How does HR make the right decisions about this?

Think about hourly employees. It's not uncommon for people working at home to skip lunch or work late into the evening. What does that mean for overtime? Businesses are going to have to figure out how to handle the overtime issue when they can't just tell employees to stop and go home. If an employee works overtime without permission, are you still obligated to pay overtime rates? Maybe someone will implement an application that boots hourly employees off the network after a set period of time.

And that's just the beginning of the HR implications. How do you determine who deserves a promotion? Or will you even need managers in a virtual office, where an intelligent, cloud-based electronic managerial assistant can make sure everyone is doing what they're supposed to do? Will we try to create a new version of the flat organization, with one boss and a bunch of worker bees?

What about taxes?

A virtual office will have tax implications for both the employees and the companies. There may be a huge opportunity for someone to help contract workers to navigate through the changes and complexities of self-employment taxes. But even that's thinking too small. If you have a couple of contract workers in a particular state, how does that affect the overall business as far as regulations and taxes? What about health care laws as they continue to evolve? Will a business with 5,000 contract workers and no employees be required to provide health care? If not, will the government want to come up with a way to fill that gap. The legal firms to stake out a leading position in that specialty will have found a gold mine.

What will happen to grabbing a drink after work?

Whether it's stopping by the corner bar on the way home from work, exchanging gossip over lunch, or simply sticking your head into a co-worker's office, collaboration often works best when it's unplanned. Might there be an opportunity for a business based on planning real-life gatherings for virtual organizations?

We're looking at a evolutionary revolution in the way people work, and we've only begun to imagine the potential changes the rise of the virtual office will produce. This is a good example of how I try to get you to think through the predictable problems, and opportunities that rapid change represents. What would it look like if the majority of the workforce was virtual? How would that change society, and what opportunities does that present? As you might guess, there's still time to influence the future of work and our relationship to it. What can your company do – right now – to grab that golden ring?

About the Author:

DANIEL BURRUS is considered one of the world's leading technology forecasters and innovation experts, and is the founder and CEO of Burrus Research, a research and consulting firm that monitors global advancements in technology driven trends to help clients understand how technological, social and business forces are converging to create enormous untapped opportunities. He is the author of six books including The New York Times best seller Flash Foresight. This article is reprinted with permission. Reproduction without permission is strictly prohibited. For reprint permission, contact Burrus Research, Inc. at office@burrus.com.

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